

THE GIRL WHO FOUND
THE BLUE BIRD
BY
GEORGETTE LEBLANC

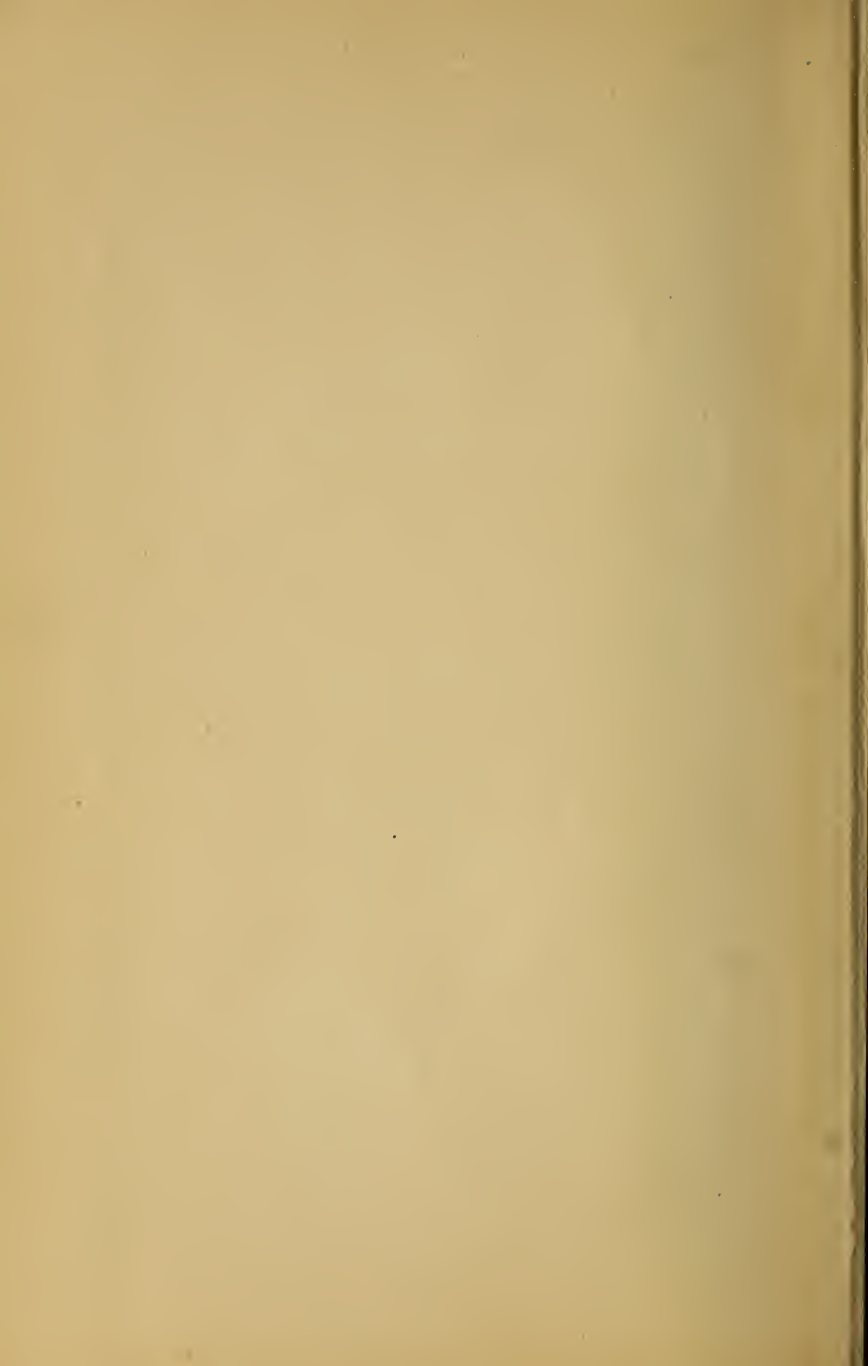


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THE GIRL WHO FOUND
THE BLUE BIRD





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HELEN KELLER

THE GIRL WHO FOUND THE BLUE BIRD

A VISIT TO HELEN KELLER

BY
GEORGETTE LEBLANC
(Madame Maurice Maeterlinck)

TRANSLATED BY
ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

With Portraits ✓

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1914

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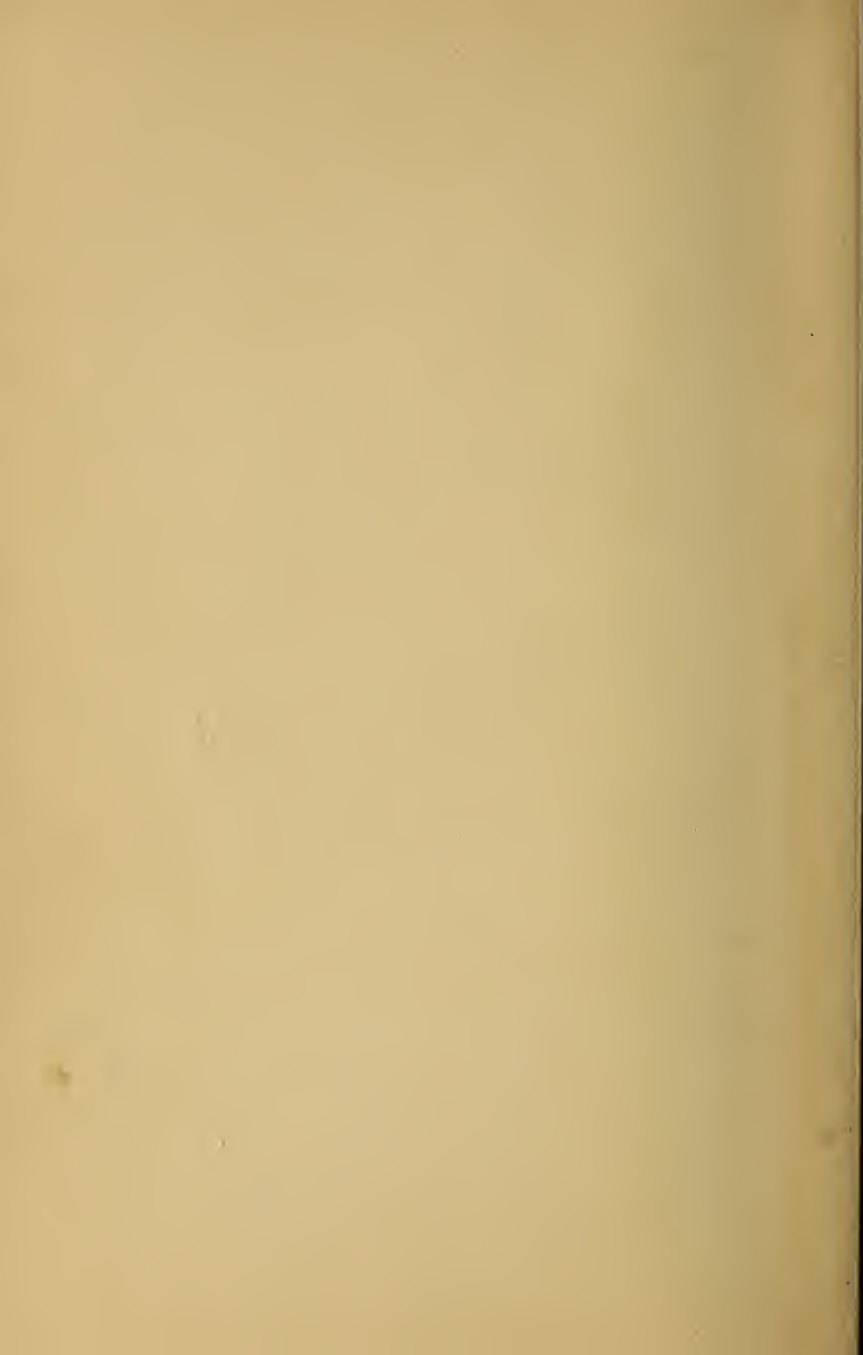
ILLUSTRATIONS

Helen Keller . . . *Frontispiece*

Georgette Leblanc . . . *Facing page 62*



PART I



I

THOUGH I lived for centuries, I should not forget a colour, a shade, a line, nor any single detail of the thousand that form the memory of my visits to Helen Keller, the celebrated deaf, dumb and blind American girl.

We are always making fresh acquaintances; we look upon it as a natural, everyday occurrence. We go to meet an unknown person with less emotion than we feel when visiting for the first time a country or a cathedral; and yet it is often for us the preface to a great event.

If we could divine the existence of exceptional creatures and go through the world seeking them,

even as we go from one museum to another, then our travels would, in my opinion, be far more interesting and of far greater beauty.

The mystery of our meetings is infinite, for each individual is a new experience. We have been told his name, his birth and his position; and yet we know nothing. What is his inner life? What are the qualities of his mind and heart? What are his interests, his longings, his sorrows and his joys? In a word, what are the elements that widen or narrow the distance between us? Is a word enough to make us hope that we have bridged that gulf? Or shall we need months merely to perceive the other side, shall we be years in winding round its edges?

We look at each other, we smile, we go in quest of each other,

Sometimes we find each other for an instant in the little path of common tastes and fondly imagine that we are alike. But the gulf is still there! In vain we look down into its depths: it consists of a formidable past that is sealed to us, of a character which we shall never really know, of an intangible soul and of a spirit different from our own; it consists of a thousand things, all foreign to ourselves, which nevertheless, when entering into our spirit, will take its form, even as a liquid takes the shape of the vessel that contains it. And this will give us the eternal and charming illusion of understanding and of being understood.

The strong consider one another at a distance, the restless clash together, the weak, staggering one towards the other, find themselves

momentarily erect again; but very rarely do we know the wild, romantic delight of blending in perfect harmony our ideas, our wishes and our dreams.

It was with these thoughts that I went to Wrentham, where Helen Keller lives, my heart wrung with a twofold emotion, knowing that I was going to encounter an admirable intelligence, but never hoping to make myself understood; certain of finding myself in the presence of a perfect soul, yet imagining no opening through which to reach it. No doubt, our meeting would be governed by new laws; but what manner of laws?

Dear Helen, you were soon to prove to me that, by the straight highways of simplicity and trust, two minds can pass beyond looks and words and find each other.

II

NEVER shall I forget my long motor-drive through the mournful country-side. The wheels sink deep into the snow; the desolate trees lift their gaunt boughs in vain appeal to the leaden sky. We go through pine-woods: how eloquent is their sombre velvet in this cold setting! We pass humble villages: the black wooden cabins remind me of the *isbas*; I might be in Russia. But here and there appears a cottage painted light-green, orange-red or bright-yellow; and then, with the dazzling snow that frames it, the landscape makes me think of a Japanese print with its white margins.

As the roads and banks are

buried under the snow, the car bounds along, jolting incessantly over invisible obstacles. No one seems alarmed and nothing stays our rapid pace, for, in America, people go faster than elsewhere and think less of danger. This crisp air is so heavily laden with electricity that, at every moment, the touch of one's hands creates a spark; and it gives an impression of life crackling under a glass sky. There is no mist, no rain, no listlessness, no dreaming. Unfettered by the past, all the forces of the race go straight ahead.

To-day, my excursion is made under the guidance of a charming girl; for you no sooner express a wish in this country, where hospitality is a religion, than all your friends are at your service. I enjoy watching my companion, a

thorough American, for all her French charm of manner. Her profile is smiling and grave, her beauty at once bold and reticent; and her whole person breathes a most attractive air of mingled independence and seriousness. She represents to me the fair flower of an unfamiliar land and an unfamiliar system of education; and I find myself studying her with equal curiosity and sympathy. Yesterday, we were at the same party, dancing and singing late into the night. And, now, the winter sun has not yet risen and we are both thinking with anguish, in the icy morn, of the poor unknown sister towards whom we are hastening.

Every one directs us on our way, for Helen Keller is immensely popular. When we reach Wren-

tham, we are at once told where she lives:

"Go right through the village; it's the first house standing by itself."

Both of us are pressing our faces to the window and we see first a small, one-storeyed building, with a long inscription over the door:

"That's the library which Miss Keller presented to the village," says my friend.

But we are already past the cluster of farms and villas that constitute Wrentham; and yonder, on a slight eminence, appears the house which we are seeking, a large cottage standing white in its white garden. As the car begins to mount the slope, the sun throws off its last morning veil and the shadows of the trees lengthen across the glittering snow.

My heart shrinks as I behold that familiar picture which She has never seen. Our car stops. The church clock in the distance strikes ten; and its booming voice mingles with the laughter of the harness-bells dancing along the road. A dog barks persistently in a farm hard by. Does the snow, which deadens the sound of wheels and footsteps, make voices seem louder, as though they were striking against invisible walls to come back to us more merrily? I feel as though I hear too clearly. . . .

I look at the house bright with many windows, all uncurtained. Is there not something ironical in this?

On two sides of the cottage are white-painted wooden piazzas; and one of them is prolonged to form a pergola. A few brave, belated

leaves cling round the pillars.
Why is it all so pretty?

A row of windows close together form a charming verandah: here again there are no curtains. What is the use of all this readiness to welcome the sweet country into her home?

Her home! How cruel it looks to me in the smiling perfection of its beauty! How gay and lively everything appears!

A few seconds ago, I was hearing sounds with singular intensity; and now I am ashamed at the unnatural distinctness with which I see the smallest things. . . .

I have been unconsciously following my companion's firm step. After crossing one of the piazzas, we entered the hall. She sent in our names; and we are now waiting in the parlour. It is a gay

and hospitable room, flooded with daylight. Flowers everywhere, bright colours, patches of sunlight playing on the waxed floor. On one side, the winter landscape fills the broad, bare windows; on the other, the eager flames leap in the great fireplace: the impression is sharply divided, like a fruit hard and sour in one part, soft and mellow in another.

Standing with my eyes fixed on the pallid country, I think of Helen; and giddily, as, in our dreams, we run to the brink of a precipice, I turn a shuddering gaze towards the landmarks of her stupendous life.

I first heard the name of Helen Keller, some years ago, through our friend Gérard Harry.

"Don't leave America without seeing Helen Keller," he said.

"What Mark Twain observed about her has become a classic: 'The two most interesting characters of the nineteenth century are Napoleon and Helen Keller.' "

"What has she done?"

"She is deaf, dumb and blind; she reads German, French, Latin and Greek; she has passed the most difficult examinations at Radcliffe College; she has written her autobiography; and she is only twenty-eight."

A few days later, I had read her story and, with deep emotion, had traversed with her the successive stages of her deliverance.¹ Helen's life! A mad ascent, a

¹ Not long after, two studies appeared on Helen Keller: *Man's Miracle*, by Gérard Harry; and *Le Cas de Miss Keller*, an article by Marie Lenéru in which that admirable writer translates extracts from Helen Keller's essay, *Sense and Sensibility*.

superhuman determination to come up merely with the normal being. But, like the swift runner, she goes beyond the goal.

I will not here repeat the details of a biography which is now known on both sides of the Atlantic. Besides, one hesitates to insist on heredity in this connection, for the reason that the phenomenon which Helen presents utterly removes her from all idea of lineage. She is more isolated than any living creature, first by her inferiority and next by her superiority, for the perfect being must be solitary, even as the ripe fruit separates from the tree.

I will give simply the main outlines of her life. Until the age of nineteen months, Helen was similar to other children: she owes her physical defects to an illness.

She has therefore faintly beheld the glory of the noontide, the glow of evening, the abyss of night. Presently, her detractors—for not even this detail is lacking to her fame—will make use of that fact to depreciate her merits.

“The child born blind and deaf is a lump of matter,” wrote Büchner.

And his fellow-countrymen will say:

“As Helen Keller once saw and heard, all that she now does is to remember.”

Certainly our heroine has seen the world and may have retained the image of it; but her consciousness, which developed long afterwards, had to blossom in its darkness; and it was into the intellect that its roots delved to find their nourishment. Besides, what is the

value of a memory, other than its own value? The beauty of the soul diminishes or increases all that descends into it; and we can never fill more than the cup that is held out to us.

Until the age of nine years, Helen Keller is a monster. A peevish and unmanageable little animal, she struggles and suffers without knowing it. Then a young governess, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, comes to her and undertakes her education with the patience of a saint. She invents methods of communication: first, the designation of objects, the names of which she traces on the child's hand; next, the connection between words and things. Follows the awakening of thought, the exercise of reflection, until at last, by means of more and more subtle

experiments, a conception of the abstract is attained. One fine summer's day, while Anne Sullivan is endeavouring to make the child enter into the kingdom of the feelings, Helen, after hesitating between the warmth of the sun and the scent of the flowers clasped in her small fingers, throws herself into Anne's arms. She has grasped the fact that love lies there, in the heart of her rescuer.

We are appalled at the thought of that pregnant moment, when Helen's mind was awakened simultaneously to the sense of its awfulness and of its power. Turning towards the darkness, Helen asked for the light; and she turned and turned in vain, like a sufferer on a bed of torment! The gradation that enables us to bear our trou-

bles by accustoming us to them did not exist for her. At each movement, that captive soul received a mortal blow; and this at the happy age when a child's laughter at every moment gains a fresh triumph.

By what miracle did Helen's reason survive? Does moral force exist in a poor little creature who is still separated from the world by the slenderest of partitions? No; and I believe that Helen was saved because she already possessed the passion for conquest. She gauges an obstacle only the better to overcome it.

From the day on which Helen Keller first became a sentient being, her progress was unprecedented and swifter than that of normal children; her imagination

was surprising; and we see shining in the depths of her darkness the divine spirit of enquiry that will support her all the days of her life. She thinks, she improves her mind, she writes; she is zealous and active; she creates institutions for the welfare of the blind, founds libraries, interests herself in politics, travels, plays games and visits museums.

Does this mean that Helen does not suffer? Let there be no mistake made: though the troubles of super-beings are less apparent to our eyes, though such beings do not fill the air with their cries and clamours, they nevertheless suffer more intensely than others, for our sufferings are proportionate to our powers of resistance.

We attribute to the dying man regrets which he no longer has,

for everything disperses together.
Even so, the misfortunes that assail us when we are in our prime find room only within the compass of our soul.

III

BUT suddenly a sound of footsteps rouses me from my reverie: I hear some one in the distance, on the echoing stairs; it is She, it is certain to be She! A sort of enthusiastic fear quickens my whole being; and my thoughts riot like a swarm of midges in a ray of sunshine. In a moment I shall see her! What will she be like? What sort of face will she have, what sort of expression and bearing? How are we going to communicate? How shall I penetrate into her prison? Alas! I declined, when she so kindly offered to come to me yesterday. I wanted to meet her in her own home, amid her familiar surround-

ings. All this is often indicative of character; and, now that I am here, my fancy seems to me childish. Is she not ever and always in her tower of darkness and silence? What can colour or form or harmony matter to her? Are not her relations to things cold and lifeless? Does her splendid isolation touch the outer world at any point? How can I hope to find her more easily in her house than amid the triviality of an hotel sitting-room?

She is here, close to me, on the arm of Mrs. Macy, her teacher, her good angel, her life. I saw her coming from the far end of three large rooms separated by wide bays. She is here! At first, I could not believe that this was she, this smiling girl who seemed to be looking at me out of her fine blue eyes; and I instinctively

turned to Mrs. Macy, who herself was blind until the age of twenty and who still wears a white veil to temper the light to her weak eyes. But Helen spoke! With an effort, she pronounces a few words of welcome; and, when I hear that voice which comes from an abyss, that laugh, that ghostly laugh, which echoes through her silence like revellers' footsteps in the stillness of the night, I feel the hateful distance that parts us and I am filled with dread.

You will forgive me, dear Helen, and your generous soul will smile indulgently down in your crystal darkness. You know that we apply the term miracle to all that surpasses our understanding and that, directly we come into touch with the finer realities, our instinctive alarm clothes them in

mystery. And so, when our two souls sought each other, mine, blinded with tears, was the one that was really astray: too far to hear your call, too weak to come to you at once, it was in despair at not finding the road to the kingdom which it felt was near at hand. Since that day, we have become friends, I have understood you and I know that, in telling you to-day what I suffered during our first interview, I shall be revealing nothing to your wondrous vision. How your pity rose superior to mine, when I instinctively turned away my face wet with tears while my lips formed trembling words beneath your fingers! . . .

From the moment, therefore, when I first set eyes on Helen Keller, I was excited, anguish-stricken, shuddering, tossed inces-

santly between enthusiasm and horror, by turns astounded and revolted, incapable of estimating, grasping or analysing my impressions; my imagination was distraught, my reason unbalanced, my whole mind was in disorder; and this first visit was wholly dominated by the force and novelty of my sensations. While Helen, with serenity stamped upon her brow, but yet curious about my life, *spoke* and asked me a thousand questions, gathering unwitting answers from my mouth, it was I who was deaf and dumb and blind in the presence of that being who seemed to see me without seeing, to hear me without hearing and to speak to me from the heart of the unknown, for my senses had suddenly become useless and surged blindly against faculties which I perceived with-

out being able to understand them. My brain formulated solutions which it saw to be mad:

“While Helen is undoubtedly deprived of our manner of hearing and seeing, does she not possess a sixth and a seventh sense whose existence we do not suspect?”

I stood dismayed in the presence of that power whose stupendous mystery baffled me at every instant and whose greatness I could only measure by the excess of my own bewilderment. . . .

The person who would venture to speak dogmatically of Helen Keller after an hour's visit may be taken to belong to the vast family of the demented, who behold without seeing, listen without hearing and speak without understanding.

IV

WHEN I saw the two women come forward, I took a few steps to meet them; and this brought us to the hall. In America, as in England, the intimacy of most of the houses greets you on the threshold. The cold entrance-lobby, where we too often leave with our furs or our sunshades some of our inner warmth or light, does not exist. Here, the hall connects the parlour and the dining-room without interrupting their hospitable charm. There are flowers and books upon a table; deep easy-chairs are drawn up to the blazing logs; and one is often thick in conversation on the first steps of the staircase.

We are standing close together. Helen has not left the arm of her companion, whose husband, a young American with a smile full of sympathy and understanding, has now joined the group. Helen is tall and well-developed. She has a finely-shaped head and well-cut, regular features: the nose almost classically straight; the rather full mouth nobly curved; the chin small but firm; the eyes set in their deep sockets, alas, to screen a too-penetrating glance; and, dominating all, a lofty brow, a high, square forehead that attracts and holds the attention. Is it because the eyes are lacking that it seems so much alive? Very clear, very smooth, with only a tiny furrow grooved in the centre by effort and study, it is indeed the sun of that countenance, bathing it with

its radiance. You feel that, if you covered it, everything would grow dim. Encircling her brow is a black-velvet ribbon, its edges prettily worked with very dainty steel beads. Her chestnut hair, dressed low down in the neck, is devoid of wave or parting and drawn back into a tight knot behind. At the utmost, a softening touch may occasionally be given by a lock which has eluded the imprisoning ribbon and strayed on her temples; and yet this severe style suits her and, when we study her profile and her rather masculine throat, straight and pure as a column, we are reminded of the Athenian youths on some bas-relief.

Helen always holds herself very erect, almost to stiffness, and her dress is that of any other American girl away from the big centres.

The full, grey-cloth skirt and the blouse of embroidered *ninon* suggest a well-proportioned and softly-rounded figure. She gesticulates freely; and the nervous vigour of her movements is full of interest and significance. Her arms have the force of two strange little people, the ready hands, now insistent, now receptive, forming the mysterious little heads, devoted to the service of an invisible sovereign. While those hands actually hear and speak, they also appear to see, so quick are they to grasp things or avoid them. They are the outriders of Helen's firm step and recoil instinctively from the obstacle before coming in contact with it.

I have mentioned Helen's step. It alone is a revelation. All her energy, her tenacity, her pluck,

her superhuman courage, all her power is there, in that firm and rapid walk which seems to dart forward under the constant governance of an irresistible law. You have but to observe the girl for a moment to feel in her an impetuous force, captive passions that at first knock impatiently at closed doors and then escape by unsuspected outlets. Very few people give so powerful an impression of vitality. In a drawing-room full of visitors, in a volatile atmosphere of glances, smiles and chatter, Helen, quivering as the forest quivers in the night wind, change-ful, impetuous, eloquent as nature itself, or suddenly terrifying in her adamant-ine immobility, Helen would proclaim the victory of the inner life and would stand there,

in the midst of pleasure, like a
sublime and eternal interroga-
tion! . . .

V

AT moments of direct communication, that is to say, when Helen gathers on my lips a scarce-opened thought that seems to blossom in the warmth of her intelligent hand, her grave expression first denotes attention; next a joyous convulsion of her whole body takes us by surprise. It is a movement brilliant as a lightning-flash which tells us that her darkness is suddenly riven. Thus her erect and formal bearing is constantly broken by shivers which are caused by nothing that is apparent to those who watch her. To her, they correspond with so many vibrations and with a whole little world of sensations which we do not perceive.

Those faint thrills and violent convulsions, which make her start exactly as though she had received an electric shock, are the revelation of a life that has its own laws and its own conventions.

Her features retain no trace of the terrible battles that must have been waged within her at the time of life's awakening. And yet how she must have battered herself against her prison-walls before accepting that life; with what rebellious and what mad despair she must at first have flung herself upon the doors that would not let her through! I feel her to be ardent and passionate, full of health and of impatience. This woman whom I am observing with all my powers and who sometimes quivers under my glance as though it reached her

mind, this woman assuredly is not one of the meek. Her face is modelled by the cruel and exquisite fingers of an infinite sensibility; her nostrils seize and savour the slightest breeze and, at such times, tremble with a longing that sets her face rippling like water brushed by a bird's wing.

Her mouth, the idle servant of the mind, the servant straying in silence: more than any other is it not devoted to the pleasure of ready smiles, of sunshine and roses? And do not her ever-flickering eyelids seem to droop over quivering glances? Everything in her betrays perpetual alarms; but I feel that she is armed and ready for the fray. I see her, blind as she is, sword in hand. Bravely she fights, without flinching; she purifies her dreams, without chasing

them away; she stands her ground, measures forces and wins. She strikes back boldly at life as it assails her; and, when beaten, she is able in her secret soul to draw victory out of her defeat. She knows the triumph that belongs to the vanquished. She has learnt that, in the great balance of all-pervading injustice, there is no such thing as lasting sorrow. For, while the palms and laurels weigh down one scale, sorrow rises in the other, rises in solitude, thus proclaiming the one victory that can crown its proud beauty.

I am not mistaken. It is a superhuman energy that incessantly brings Helen back to the essential peace; and I tremble when I think of that force which is ever going from the night into the night, of that force which wakes and falls

asleep, works, laughs and moves
in darkness. . . .

What celestial treasure is it that
each morning, in the recesses of a
prison-house, creates anew the
charm of dawn and sunlight?

VI

WE are sitting in the parlour; and Mr. Macy's hand is now speaking to Helen's. The girl bends her head as though the better to absorb the revealing element; she smiles and answers with her nimble fingers. Then her friend stands up and moves away . . . and we suddenly see Helen's silence! I see it: it is tangible and so heavy that it seems gradually to arrest all conversation. I have lost the power of speech. My thoughts leave the bright room and I pass through the same terrifying sensation which I experienced once before, when visiting a mine a thousand feet below ground: I then thought that the weight of the

world was bearing upon my frail shoulders; and it was as though I could not find room to breathe in the interminable gallery. I look at Helen, immured upright, enigmatic in her tomb. No, I cannot imagine that her silence, which is eternal, can be soft, peaceful and sweet like ours, like that which we seek and which we love because it steepens us in unalloyed joy. Hers seems to me to be of lead, similar to that which is broken by the decisive words or deeds that come to inflict a mortal wound upon our soul. And it reminds me also of the most terrible of all silences, that of the waiting which has outlasted hope. The air that surrounds us at such times seems to harden like plaster; and our feet can no longer bear us, our hands can no longer meet, our tears are

dried and our heart stops beating. An icy breath is upon us; and we feel that, when death comes, it must come like this.

I should like to speak, so as to cease thinking; I should like to make a movement: why is it impossible? I suffer, I choke on the brink of the darkness where I feel that She breathes. She dwells in a solitude where my imagination loses itself. Where is she? Where is she? The gulf that opens before me is too deep; my sensations, my thoughts, my sentiments roll into it without the least echo reaching my ears. I am as one who throws stones into a well to sound its depth and who, hearing no sound, measures infinity by the answering silence. Thus I gauge the force of the impression made upon me by the sudden

eclipse of my life. . . . Still, I must flee from my too vivid emotions, I must escape from Helen's silence. I try to turn away from it, but it is everywhere: was it not this silence that broke up the conversation and separated each one of us? My friend stands leaning against the chimney-piece; she holds out first one small foot and then the other to the flames. Mrs. Macy is looking for a book; and Mr. Macy is at the window in the next room, gazing out upon the wintry landscape. No, it is not the silence that has divided them, for Mr. Macy and his wife know the infinite loneliness of their dear sister; as for my companion, that daring little Amazon is very seldom seized with panic. No, they have moved away so that I may converse

with Helen by myself. I have but to take her hand: I will place it softly to my mouth; Helen will understand me, will answer me; and slowly, reverently I shall approach her soul and break her silence. . . . But, if it appears to me unsurmountable, that is because the mighty rush of my own life comes breaking against it like a wave, because I arrive on the threshold of the sanctuary a prey to vain agitations, because the noise of the world is still ringing wildly in the caverns of my brain and because my face, my hands, my hair and the very folds of my dress are still spangled with all the unknown glances. . . .

In the inevitable oneness of your soul, Helen, you do not know the exaltation that arises from self-detachment. It exists in life; but on

the stage it is all-powerful: you do not know what a perturbing thing it is to feel sorrow, joy and love, to outstretch our arms, to measure our steps, to smile or weep, all in the little space formed by another's thoughts. In a counterfeit ray of moonlight, through words learnt by rote and sentiments deliberately assumed, we pour out our very souls, for truth alone can soften and subdue. . . .

That is why, on entering your house, I was at once afraid of my overwrought nerves, of my unbridled feelings. It is I, in my palace with the thousand open doors, I who tremble at receiving you. My ears, Helen, are filled with wondrous harmonies, my eyes are heavy with fair visions and my lips distil, together with the flowers of gladness, the divine fictions of

the poets. Under the limpid skies of your young country, my fondly-pampered emotion is incessantly in advance of my reason. I have quitted solitude, for a time, quitted the temple whither we return nightly to lay at the feet of our gods the treasures amassed throughout the day. Let me collect myself, dear Helen; for my eyes, ears and lips are the willing victims of life.

I leant my head on the blind girl's shoulder. She gave a shiver, slowly clasped her hands and pressed them to my heart. I felt that her breath was coming more quickly; I looked at her: she was pale and turned her face towards me. I imagined that she saw me at that moment, for a tear softened her eyes. Can one say that eyes are dead when there still shines

from them an expression so eloquently alive?

In a very low tone, she articulated:

“I have found your heart.”

Then, after a long silence, nervously, as though obeying the impulse of an admirable discipline, she raised her head proudly, tried to smile and turned full to the sun, which came and played in her glazed pupils.

VII

HELEN wishes to show me her study, drags me away posthaste.

“Don’t be astonished,” says Mrs. Macy, laughing. “Helen cannot walk slowly. I no longer try to keep up with her in the country: she used to tire me too much. Now, she goes out with my husband; and they take long walks together in the morning.”

“Does she get up early?”

“She is always the first,” replies Mrs. Macy. “She is up at six o’clock, dresses and does her hair by herself; and she even likes doing her own room. She must always be active. Do you see that wire,” she asked, going to a window, “stretched from tree to tree

all round the grounds? That is to let Helen run about freely without fear of hurting herself. When she wants exercise, she takes hold of the wire and scampers along it, in wind, rain or snow, like a regular boy."

Full of curiosity, I go on asking questions. Mr. Macy answers them all; and I learn that every day, after the morning walk in the country, Helen comes back to work. She is at present writing an essay on the submerged tenth, for her heart aches over the sufferings of the poor. She takes a keen interest in politics; Mrs. Macy interprets the newspaper to her; and the afternoons are spent quietly in reading, working and thinking. Helen is fond of every kind of sport: she boats, rides and loves bicycling tandem, for the speed of

it intoxicates her and puts her in the highest spirits. She loves her dogs; and they love her and accompany her on all her expeditions. She receives so many letters, from all over the world, that she is unable to reply to any but those which interest her specially. Often young girls come out from Boston to visit her: she likes their gaiety. She can embroider, knit and do every sort of needlework; but more serious occupations attract her fine intelligence. Sometimes, as a relaxation from the work of the day, she plays cards or chess in the evening. They show me the ingenious chess-board contrived for her use and the cards which she names to me one by one, handling them with such dexterity that I have hardly time to perceive the little raised signs with which they are marked.

We are now in the study. This is Helen's kingdom. Again, floods of light, more light than anywhere else, and a silence that seems to me to be increased by that host of white books which speak only to her fingers. On the table in the middle of the room stands a typewriter specially constructed for the blind girl's use; on the wall, I see a medallion of Homer hung low enough for her easily to reach and touch it; and I remember the moving lines which she devotes to it in her *Story of my Life*:

"How well I know each line in that majestic brow: tracks of life and bitter evidences of struggle and sorrow; those sightless eyes seeking, even in the cold plaster, for the light and the blue skies of his beloved Hellas, but seeking in vain."

And she quotes these lines of the great poet whom she loves:

"O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze
of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!"

Behind the chair in which she sits is a wide bow-window with shelves on which pots of flowers are arranged as in a conservatory. On her right, another window brings her the first rays of the morning. Everything is bright, wholesome and happy-looking, with no vain luxury. It is good to be here and to inhale real life, stripped of all its useless ornaments. Flowers, light and books make Helen's kingdom.

I examine the big volumes standing on shelves along the two main walls of the room. Mr. and Mrs. Macy explains that the blind girl reads from embossed characters and from braille, which has sev-

eral variations. The ordinary embossed book is printed in roman type, but the characters, which are very simply designed, are square and sharply angular; the small letters are nearly a fifth of an inch high; and they are raised above the page to about the thickness of a thumb-nail. The size of the books is similar to that of a volume of an encyclopædia. I take up one and am surprised at its lightness, which is due to the fact that, as the characters in relief prevent the sheets from lying quite flat, the number of pages in a volume is bound to be small. There are not many books of this kind, for they are very expensive to produce; but Helen's friends have had everything that was likely to interest her specially set up; and I judge the extent of her culture from the titles which

Mrs. Macy reads out to me. These include all the great philosophers, poets and dramatists: Shakespeare, Horace, Æschylus, Virgil, Cicero, Plato, Pascal. She reads in their own language the Greeks and the Romans, as well as Goethe, Schiller and Heine.

A catholic taste has presided over Helen's choice. She is thoroughly versed in French literature and fondly quotes to me the most varied thoughts of Maeterlinck. She has learnt pages of *The Blue Bird* by heart, for the pleasure of constantly brightening her solitude with them. She recites them to me in a shadowy voice which she seems to draw from her heart itself; then she gives me for Maeterlinck a copy of her latest work, *The World I live In*, and, in a firm hand, inscribes it with some

lines spoken by the Fairy in *The Blue Bird*:

“All stones are alike, all stones are precious, but man sees only a few of them.”

“Men are to be pitied,” adds Helen. “They do not know how to be happy.”

And, after a pause:

“I am sorry for men,” she sighs.

VIII

WE are in Helen's bedroom, on the first floor, a very cheerful, very tidy, white-walled room. The bed faces the window, which opens on a large balcony overlooking the garden. I am told that Helen loves to rest her elbows on the rail and turn her eyes towards the familiar landscape. She goes straight to the balcony now; and, as she passes from the shadow to the sunshine, she holds out both hands to the light and laughs as she feels the hot rays upon her face.

"She adores the sun," says Mr. Macy. "She always receives it as an unexpected favour."

Standing there, heedless of the icy air, which she inhales raptur-

ously, Helen cries, like a happy child:

“The sun! . . . The sun!”

How primitive she seems to me at this moment! She is indeed wholly absorbed in a material satisfaction: she is one with the earth, the trees, the plants, with all the animal life which she loves and understands with a deeper insight than we.

Are we not often limited by our senses?

“When we see everything, we see nothing,” wrote that wonderful woman, Laurent Evrard.

In front of us, a great tree, stripped by the hand of winter, stands out against the cold sky. Its gnarled roots raise the snow like hands folded under a white sheet; and its shadow lying stark upon the ground is the elegy of its

spring. This tree calls up a picture of human misery. Those over-zealous slaves, my eyes, have seen much besides the tree; and, by a combination of images evolved in my brain, I am at last carried thousands of miles from what I look upon. What does Helen see? Nothing and everything. Undistracted by any object, she holds communion with space and light and with the garden, which has yielded all its secrets to her. Many a time she has encircled the tree with her arms; she has surprised its whispering to the wind; she has considered its leaves; she has felt it groaning against her heart; she has had the height and the shape of its branches explained to her; and she has breathed the perfume of its bark at all hours of the day. If she is now thinking

of the great tree, she sees it better than we do, for all her energies are occupied in recreating it in the light of her knowledge.

Our glance has barely alighted before our attention is far away; and sometimes even our eyes rest on an object without summoning our intelligence. Our laws are other; and this is fortunate, for our too-busy senses would tyrannise over us, if habit did not make them, to a certain extent, act independently of us.

Very often, our eyes and ears amuse themselves like children under the closer contemplation of a spirit that is absorbed in itself, hearkening only to its own harmonies and pursuing its own life, one that obliterates shapes and banishes sounds; one that is steeped in an eternal radiance; one that, I

doubt not, taught a Helen Keller
how to smile, thus by a secret
glimmer revealing its divine pres-
ence.

IX

“It’s lunch-time,” says Mrs. Macy. “You must stay and lunch with us.”

Such an atmosphere of simplicity pervades this house that it seems quite natural to me to form part of this gracious and charming household as long as possible; and, when we go back to the parlour, preceded by Helen’s vigorous step, I find it difficult to believe that I am only setting foot in it for the second time. One might live at Wrentham without making any change in the house. In the hospitable depths of just such English easy-chairs, we read our favourite books; the low window-seats are a temptation to day-dreams;

and it is the peace which we cherish that lies over all these things which we ourselves might have chosen. Those who live here have succeeded, by the force of their individual life, in making their home what it always should be, but so seldom is, a haven: a haven not only against the cold and rain, but against stealthier foes, enemies more difficult to overcome. Walls that ward off intruders, doors that shut out the folly and spite of the world, a roof that shelters peace and happiness. . . .

There are two forces in this house that keep watch like benevolent goddesses: Anne Sullivan's intelligence and her goodness. To them Helen owes her life; it is they that created her anew. Imprisoned in silence, isolated from the world, she was a little animal,

wild and insentient, struggling in the darkness. Anne's heart and brain came to set her free; and Helen cannot do without them now. The two forces that gave her life ensure her present quiet content. The thought fills me with admiration and explains the sense of well-being that steals over me.

With us, intelligence and goodness blossom in the current of indifference that bears good and evil, sorrow and joy drifting on its waters. These beautiful flowers are ours to love, to gather, to deck our lives with incessantly; but, whereas to us they are an actual luxury, the fragrance and the glory of our lot, to Helen they are a necessity, her daily bread. To be of use to her, they had to become incarnate in a human being,



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to assume a mortal shape and a superhuman soul and will.

I see them, those two guardians of the sacred prison into which they unwearyingly pour daylight, space and joy. I breathe them as one breathes the incense in a church and I find the same quietude; but the fabric is a human soul whose matter is made of love and spiritual light. Except for Anne Sullivan's intelligence and goodness, Helen would still be what she was at first, a living nullity.

What a superb lesson! Helen is not the work of life multiplying itself blindly: she is the creation of a consciousness, the offspring of an intelligence. What a rebuke to our discouragement and impatience! How great a monument we raise by merely lay-

ing one stone every day; but how humble we must be in the presence of the task!

The parlour clock strikes one. I consult my charming guide with a glance; and her smile grants me a few moments longer. This is the time at which lunch is served every day. Helen's admirable companion has simplified actions and habits as much as possible. A tray is brought with tea and coffee, sandwiches and cakes, thus doing away with one of the principal meals, those mechanical formalities which interrupt the freedom of Helen's existence so unpleasantly. Mrs. Macy at once sets Helen's favourite delicacies before her and, with fond solicitude, sugars her tea, pours in the cream and places the cup and tea-spoon in her hands.

I like this noble servitude which

has not sought to make Helen triumph over the insignificant things of life. No doubt, she can help herself when necessary and when she pleases; but why not save her the trouble? Why constrain her to spend a precious force to no purpose? When the brain cannot be obeyed instantaneously, when isolation has divorced the thought from the gesture, why bring it painfully back?

When Mrs. Macy placed the cup of tea in Helen's hands, Helen thanked her with a smile; and at that moment I received a vision of the wonderful companionship that unites the two women. With what serene superiority Helen accepts to be "the inferior" in daily life! Indeed, the blind girl may well put out her hands when she is hungry and cling to her friend's

arm when she is tired. She may well ask to be assisted in her weakness, she who from the depths of her luminous darkness extends over all those who surround her the greatest, the most beautiful, the most infinite protection! Is she not there, in the house, as a safeguard of beautiful living? She is protected, it is true; but see how she herself protects others! Can we doubt the quality of the bonds which unite that admirable trio at Wrentham? To the husband and wife, Helen's presence has the sweetness of a starry night. She is an inspiration and an encouragement to those around her and draws out the best that lies hidden in them. By the very force of her helplessness she entreats conscientiousness, she enjoins generosity; her virtue calls

for equal virtue; her energy commands courage. She is the permanent mystery amid the ordinary course of life. What lips, with that hand upon them, could have the power to utter baseness? What fingers would dare to place the weight of an unjust word on that frail palm so innocently offered?

It seems to me that lies must needs be cast aside on the threshold of her night, like useless garments. Before this life consecrated wholly to thought, that which is illusory must shrivel up, that which is not strong must abandon hope, that which is not enduring can find no peace. Habit and time themselves are vanquished at Wrentham: how could they perform their work of destruction, their gnawing, levelling and severing?

The wretched little stream of daily needs has not been and never will be able to dissolve the indispensable and sublime alliance between Helen and Anne. Can the prisoner grow accustomed to the ray of light that finds its way into his cell day after day? Should a friend succeed in communicating with him, can he ever receive without emotion the words of affection that speak to his heart deep down in the eternal silence? . . .

X

SUDDENLY, I hear Helen's laugh, that strange, lost laugh, that far-away, strident laugh which to my unaccustomed ears sounds like a joy in anguish. Mr. Macy handed her a cake; she imagined that she was taking it, but it fell into her lap; and, very quickly, as though she wished to save us from a painful thought, she laughed.

I look at Mr. Macy, who smiles as he answers:

"It's always like that, whenever she meets with a mishap. If she knocks herself, or breaks something, or does anything clumsy, *she makes fun of herself*. And then she is so cheerful; she is so fond of life: you know, she would like to

live a thousand years. She loves sports and games and, above all, study; and, would you believe it, she has also a feeling for art."

"Oh, yes!" his wife chimes in, always eager to explain the dear prodigy. "Indeed, she sometimes wonders if the hand is not more sensitive to the beauties of sculpture than the eye!"

And I remember those words of Helen's in *The Story of my Life*:

"I should think the wonderful rhythmical flow of lines and curves could be more subtly felt than seen. Be this as it may, I know that I feel the heart-throbs of the ancient Greeks in their marble gods and goddesses."

Anne Sullivan continues her welcome information:

"She is very fond of the theatre too. I explain the piece to her during the performance and she

thinks that she is living amid the events on the stage; she is player and spectator in one. She asked to meet Irving and Ellen Terry; she touched their faces and has retained an unforgettable impression of them."

Speaking of Joseph Jefferson, who was playing Rip van Winkle in New York at the time when Helen was still at school, Mrs. Macy says:

"Helen had often read the story, but she never felt the charm of it as she did in the play. The actor's beautiful, pathetic representation quite carried her away with delight. She has a picture of old Rip in her fingers which they will never lose."

Evidently, Helen has a finger memory as we have an ocular and aural memory. Anne Sullivan tells me that she and her pupil re-

member "in their fingers" what they have said at different times; and I learn that, when Helen reads a passage which interests her particularly, she repeats it on the fingers of her right hand so as to fix it in her brain. Sometimes even this gesture becomes unconscious; and, when she strolls in the garden, they see her making quick, continual movements, as though, in spite of herself, her vigorous mind felt a need to incarnate itself in her valiant hands.

But the pleasure which she takes in the theatre surprises and amazes us. By what strange intuition can Helen feel the charm of a public performance? Alone in her infinite darkness, seeing nothing and hearing nothing, while her companion tells her what is happening, could she not imagine herself at the

theatre when she is in the calm of her own room? No and again no; and that is where this astonishing being asserts her connection with a world of which we have no cognisance. The vibrations strike her, the waves of sound caress her, the mingled perfumes envelop her, she breathes the hot vaporous air. The heavily-charged atmosphere peculiar to a playhouse excites and stimulates her. The unknown agencies that inform her pass to and fro between her and the crowd, filling voids and satisfying her devouring curiosity. Her all-powerful mind catches fire; and one can imagine that solitary and passionate soul gathering all the wandering and inactive forces floating over the audience who, like children, watch the pictures and follow the events enacted on the stage.

Helen was twelve years old when Miss Sullivan first took her to the theatre. It was at Boston, where Elsie Leslie, the child-actress, was playing the chief part in a piece entitled *The Prince and the Pauper*. Helen appears to have experienced ineffaceable emotions, at once glad and melancholy. We must really admire the courage of the teacher who subjected the little blind, deaf and dumb girl to so cruel a test, bringing her into direct contact with prohibited joys and exposing her to the worst sufferings. And even more do we admire her who came victorious out of every struggle, having so to speak built upon her incomplete life a new life composed wholly of divination, intelligence and will-power. . . .

XI

ANOTHER thing proved to me how greatly Helen's sensibility differs from ours. The rush and bustle of towns wearies her; and she spoke to me of her love for the country:

"People seem surprised at this preference," she said, dragging from her throat the reluctant syllables that come forth one by one in imperfect sounds. Then, with her favourite gesture, an abrupt movement that lifts her head and imparts a proud motion to her whole bust, she continued:

"Yes, people who think that all sensations reach us through the eye and the ear have expressed surprise that I should notice any difference,

except possibly the absence of pavements, between walking in city streets and in country roads. They forget that my whole body is alive to the conditions about me. The rumble and roar of the city smite the nerves of my face; and I feel the ceaseless tramp of an unseen multitude; and the dissonant tumult frets my spirit. The grinding of heavy waggon on hard pavements and the monotonous clangour of machinery are all the more torturing to one's nerves if one's attention is not diverted by the panorama that is always present in the noisy streets to people who can see."

And Helen found pleasure in describing to me at length the joys which she derives from the sweet serenity of nature, her infinite love for flowers and especially for the

trees, which she looks upon as friends, her boating-trips, her excursions into the mountains, her walks in the fields and meadows. And, in spite of her difficulty with her speech, which sometimes needed the help of a fraternal hand to liberate its lyric vehemence, I seemed to perceive through her shrill rhapsodies the special fragrance and the mysterious beauty which belong in turns to morning, to twilight and to night, which belong, in short, to the hour that secretly enshrouds each memory deep at the bottom of our soul. Thanks to her marvellous imagination, I saw all that she had not seen, I heard all that she had not heard, I enjoyed all the pleasures that kept her palpitating before me with ardour and delight.

Then, gradually taking courage, I ventured to ask her the question

which all those who try to explain the miracle of her intelligence ask themselves: had the normal infant that she was for the first nineteen months of her life unconsciously bequeathed to her a legacy of shapes and lines and colours? With her perfect and transparent honesty, Helen hesitated for a second and then reminded me of a paragraph in her book which is evidence of her uneasiness on this point and which solves the problem in these words:

“It seems to me that there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning. Each individual has a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters; and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift from past generations. This inherited capacity is a sort of sixth sense, a soul-sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one.”

Helen also spoke to me of her games, of her dogs and of her fondness for little children; and, in doing so, she used a charming phrase:

“I wish you knew,” she was saying, “how prettily children spell into one’s hand. They are the first blossom of humanity; and their tiny fingers are as it were *the wild flowers of conversation.*”

She also said:

“It is delicious to feel one’s palm tickled by *a baby’s silky laughter.*”

And, when I asked her for further explanations, she began with these words:

“Try to understand me. You will find that no sound, however beautiful, has the eloquence of silence and that we learn more by touch than by looking. Is there not something divine in the power of the human hand? They tell

me that the glance of a loved one makes you quiver at a distance; but there is no distance in the touch of a cherished hand."

And she concluded by exclaiming:

"You are convinced now and you no longer think that I am shut out from the beauties of the physical world? One finds marvels everywhere, even in darkness and silence; and, however defective my state may be, I know how to be happy in it."

It is with this just and laudable pride that Helen is constantly asserting the charms of her kingdom. Her dignity is like a vigilant watcher on the threshold of her night. We feel that she never dallies with vain melancholy; and, if we claim the right to enter the precincts of her prison-house, she or-

ders us to study it without pity or fear and with the noble joy which the mere wish for knowledge imparts to the heart.

Helen had been speaking with her lips for a long time, while holding her friend's hand and pressing it nervously to the rhythm of her sentences. She did not seem tired; and, whenever the strain was apparent, her bright smile was always there to soften an impression that might otherwise have been painful; but I felt relieved each time that Mrs. Macy's fingers met her thought half way. How could I accustom myself to that barbarous voice repeating words, dictated by the most exquisite of souls, mechanically and with no feeling for their beauty? For everything is disconnected in this curious woman. Her means of expres-

sion, created by her will, are scattered materials which her intelligence is continually striving to bring together and which, for that very reason, make the blundering of a body that is not adapted to our conditions of life appear still stranger. Her hands, which open their palms to hear; her gestures, which are strangers; her voice, which awakens no echo within her; her words, which she patiently essays to carve out of silence: all these are astounding and bewildering. And the fairy-play begins with the spectacle of her imagination, the imagination of a poet, springing up, bursting into full magnificence and falling back upon its own source like a fountain playing in the sunshine and flooding the cold stone basin with its wealth of pearls.

XII

MEANWHILE, it was growing late; and I thought of the time, glad as I would have been to forget it. The car, which had been put up a short distance away, had stolen silently across the thick snow and was now throbbing under the windows. The dull sound produced no quiver in the air and passed unperceived by Helen; but, when my companion rose suddenly to give an order to the driver, the blind girl started and turned her head in the direction of the departing footsteps whose vibrations on the waxed floor had informed her of the movement. She guessed at once and stretched towards me hands full of ardent entreaty; and

then, impatient to express what was in her mind, she feverishly spelt out the syllables in the palm which her teacher held out to her.

“She does not wish you to go,” said Anne Sullivan, “without leaving some memory behind you. She wants you to sing her something.”

I stood dumbfounded, thinking that I must have misunderstood; but Miss Sullivan explained and, following her instruction, I went up close to Helen, who placed her left hand very lightly on my mouth. In my emotion and bewilderment, I did not know what farewell song to fix upon. My memory was like an ant-hill into which something has been suddenly thrown, sending a whole little world helter-skelter; my mind sought in vain for an air, a melody, a song of some kind; and

I was more surprised than Helen when my voice rose in the silence and sobbed out Maeterlinck's lament:

" 'Et, s'il revenait un jour, que faut-il lui dire?'

'Dites-lui qu'on l'attendit jusqu'à s'en mourir.' "

At that moment, Helen, who had bowed her head under the weight of an overpowering attention, began to lift up her right hand and her forefinger seemed to trace in space the exact shape of the line of music. Faithfully her gesture sank with the low notes and ascended in a brief flight when a higher note intervened. At the same time, her lips studiously formed each word that I pronounced.

My emotion indeed was scarcely in keeping with my singing. I

was all wrapped up in the strange experience which set my heart beating; and I remembered that Helen had written in one of her remarkable essays:

"Every atom of my body is a vibroscope."

So she went on, without faltering or blundering, to the last verse:

"'Dites-lui que j'ai souri, de peur
qu'il ne pleure.'"

Then, all anguish-stricken and panting, Helen remained fixed in a sort of inward contemplation whose gravity held all speech and movement suspended, after which her trembling hands passed, with slow precision, over my face, neck and hair.

"She wants to remember you well," whispered Mrs. Macy.

And, while Helen's fingers were *learning me by heart*, I felt that each of their touches was removing a shadow and gradually revealing my features to the light of her mind.

More touching than words or kisses, a wind from the unknown filled the sails of that mysterious farewell. I shall never forget it. The blind woman's actions were at once a blessing and a prayer. Like a thirsty soil, her darkness absorbed my spirit and the mantle of her sacred silence enveloped my life in an infinite protection. It was more eloquent than the tenderest solicitude. It manifested to us, through the anguish of a separation, the deep significance of a meeting which had taken place beyond ourselves, almost unknown to us, and which was now sinking

regretfully into our consciousness. . . .

I kissed both her dear companions; and my heart was wrung as though habit, that powerful link, had long united us. On the white piazza, in the cold landscape, I turned round for the last time. The winter sun was already red and lit up, as though they were so many sheets of metal, the windows whose bareness had struck me on my arrival; but I was no longer astonished that Helen's home was like a glass-house bathed in light: I knew now that the rarest of human plants blossomed there in its pride.

The blind girl stood erect against the glass door. Her hands were folded; and her white face glowed with passionate earnestness.

PART II

I

WHEN I left Wrentham, I thought that I should never go back to it; but on the day after my visit I had the opportunity of prolonging my stay in America and I welcomed it joyfully and was soon making my way once more to the white cottage through the same silent country clad in its luminous mantle.

Helen believes that I sailed yesterday; and I have not told her that I am coming. Will she recognise me at once? The experiment interests me, while another sentiment, deeper and more poignant, gives fresh zest to my curiosity. In the face of that personality, so vigorous and so sane, in the presence of

that bright and beautiful intelligence, the problem was now inverted: *I no longer care about being understood, I wish to understand!* I wish to find the solution to the sublime riddle which she presents. For, though Helen was born defective, she has, thanks to her pluck and her strength, become merely "different." She had to create her own relations with the universe; she adapted herself to it in a fashion other than ours; and she moves in a world peculiar to herself.

But how it irritates me to think of the moral short-sightedness that prevents us from quite naturally admitting human conditions that happen to deviate from our own! While in the heroic girl's presence, I constantly felt as if I was losing my reason. During the hours that

followed on our meeting, my enthusiasm found no outlet save in tears; and even this time, despite my convictions, despite the hope which filled me with gladness and whose justification I was coming to her to find, I none the less felt an invincible terror throbbing beneath my joy. . . .

II

HELEN was at work. We had hushed our footsteps; there was nothing to warn her. Mr. Macy softly opened the study-door; and the three of us stood on the threshold, happy to see each other again, lowering our voices instinctively as we talked and laughed, though her profound isolation protected her better than our discretion. Helen was at work and nothing could reach her; she was wholly wrapped up in her thoughts, which ranged through continents. Never had I seen a more absolute picture of intellectual activity.

Helen was using her typewriter; and the heavy silence around her was hammered regularly by the lit-

tle hard taps of each letter. Her rigid attitude was more striking than ever. She was sitting, dressed as on the last occasion, at her table by the window, where pots of flowers stand on shelves; and the same light as before turned the room into a radiant conservatory. Are not things, like human beings, loyal in their service to the blind girl? Do they not come between her and the world so as to deaden every shock? I shall often, when I think of Helen, be conscious of that fond conspiracy.

I was in no hurry to betray my presence; and my companions understood me. The picture which we were contemplating breathed such profound and absolute peace. Helen asserted in our eyes the strength and security of one living far removed from all. What a

beautiful lesson in proportion, for my senses blinded by externals! What an incomparable lesson!

"I did not take her in at all, the other day," I said to Mrs. Macy. "I was too much excited. This time, I have returned to Wrentham like a disciple to his master; and, if I understand her as I would wish, I will try with all my faith and all my heart to carry her luminous teaching to the distant sisters for whom she had such a tender solicitude."

And I imparted to Mrs. Macy all my ideas about her pupil. She told me that my deductions were correct and that I might assure myself of this by direct reference to Helen. Without this precious permission, I should not have dared question her: is not her dear Anne like a good angel standing guard

over her cloistered life? Does she not spare her everything that can be spared her?

I was about to go up to Helen, when I saw her suddenly stop working. She sighed, passed her hand over her forehead, which was a little contracted with the effort of thinking, and then resumed her writing.

I waited a little while. I could not bear to interrupt her; I was on the threshold of a temple and I was afraid lest, in knocking, I should do a mortal hurt to a prayer that seemed incarnate.

The blind girl working opposite me was both very far away, because unaware of my presence, and very near, because of that unconsciousness which allowed me, so to speak, to see the working of her mind. Until that moment, I had never

realised the impenetrable armour furnished by our senses. I was going to kiss Helen; and my kiss would be laid right upon her naked soul.

I kiss her, I stoop over her cheek, passing my arm around her neck; but she draws herself up, panting as though an electric current had touched her. Her nervous hands seek mine; then they run along my arms, my neck, my cheeks, my hair and, for a second, they doubt: her quivering nostrils recognise some subtle odour, her lips move, she is just about to speak my name. . . . But it is impossible! She knows that I am gone: this very morning she was glad of the fine weather and hoping that the sea would be merciful to my pangs. She rejects the syllables that force themselves upon her and feverishly con-

tinues her examination. I am wearing quite different clothes; and that also disconcerts her. Nevertheless, she finds the game exciting. Her face lights up with pleasure, for the feast of hearts has already begun. She laughs, I laugh too; and my gaiety removes her last doubts. Then she kisses me, hugs me, shows me her affection with adorable smiles and gestures; she falters words full of happiness; and I see the thousand pure enthusiasms of that generous nature glowing in all their radiance.

III

As I make my excuses for interrupting her work, she joyfully informs me that this is almost a holiday. Her singing-master will soon be here with his wife; they are very dear friends of hers; they both of them come two or three times a week to spend the afternoon, for the lessons are very tiring to Helen and it is only possible to work for a few moments at a time. In the intervals, they walk about and talk. . . .

Just then, Mrs. White arrives. Mr. White is detained at the Boston Conservatoire, but his wife will give the lesson on the admirable principles which he has invented for the deaf, dumb and blind

girl's benefit. They propose to start at once. We go to the parlour. I do not feel embarrassed by the presence of a stranger. Mrs. White is so thoroughly in harmony with the household that I feel as if I had met her here before. The reason is that the same love shines in the beautiful protective glance in which she envelops Helen; besides, who would not be affected by that rare atmosphere of wholesome simplicity which reigns at Wrentham?

Helen is standing against the piano. One hand is placed on the neck of Mrs. White, who, after striking a chord, sings a note. Vaguely guided by the vibration received in the palm of her hand, the deaf and dumb girl utters a sound, or rather a sort of ardent

plaint that seems flung like a buoy into an unknown sea. . . .

But the teacher's patient ear seizes an indication, fleeting, no doubt, but yet sufficient to explain to the pupil her distance from the port for which she is steering; and they begin all over again, twenty and thirty times in succession.

"Higher, Helen, higher still, and remember the vibration," says Mrs. Macy, who is holding her right hand and thus saving her the effort of reading what the singing-mistress is saying.

The difficulty is great enough as it is; I can feel that the girl finds it terribly hard to draw her poor lost voice from the abyss in which it is struggling; and, when, after ten minutes, the practice is stopped, her face relaxes and her attitude is eloquent of satisfaction at a well-

earned rest. Then she takes my arm affectionately, to return to her study:

"We can talk better here," she says; and, as she utters the words, she calls my attention to the increased flexibility of her voice after those exercises; and this encourages her to hope that she will be able to speak in public in a few years' time.

She would so much like to give lectures.

"On what?"

"Oh, first on the education of deaf, dumb and blind women," she replies, quickly. "And then on women in general."

Helen goes on to explain that she once had a feminine ideal which she has outgrown, as it failed to stand the severe test of her criticism. She believes that women, with their

judgment and their patient energy, are called upon to play their part in the world's education: then, she says, men will no longer address themselves to women's weakness, but to their strength; and women will be more precious in proportion as their character is developed.

She has two favourite heroines: Iphigenia, whom she loves for the conflicting ideas that rend her soul, and Maeterlinck's Ariane, who, by her deeds and words, seems to create a new morality of freedom, love and daring.

"I find them admirable," she says, "alike in their virtues and their failings." And, with a smile, she adds, "Horace, it is true, tells us, in one of his odes, that many faults are virtues which we do not understand. But, in any case, we

ought to give gentler names to the failings of those we love."

"You, Helen, whose life is less subject to distractions than ours and who live above all in the spirit, you must have very few faults?"

"Then they are all the greater!" says the blind girl, laughing.

Ah, dear Helen, your victory answers for you: if you were not determined to the point of obstinacy, courageous to rashness, inquisitive almost to disobedience and self-willed almost to rebellion, how should you have lightened your darkness? Horace spoke truly, for our faults are often the extremes of our virtues; without them, those virtues remain passive; thanks to them, they live, they dare and they become magnificently shameless.

"I am always angry at my slow-

ness," she cries, with an energy that drives the syllables against the sides of her throat. "I grow irritated at the stupidity of this machine of mine."

And, so that I may know of which machine she speaks, she strikes her head and her throat with mock ferocity. Then she goes on:

"My ideas fight wildly for expression, as in *The Blue Bird* the little Children of the Future fight to come into the world. But Father Time keeps them from getting out. I hope he won't do the same with my ideas! . . ."

We all laugh at Helen's fancy, but I cannot help protesting. She calls herself slow! It is only a very short time since light has penetrated to her soul; and yet she seems the fruit of a century of patience. Tenacious as nature, as

the drop of water that wears away the stone, as the ivy whose unwearying vigour clothes the ruins in an eternal spring, her existence is the emblem of human effort overcoming all the powers of darkness and steering straight for the light. She calls herself slow! And we see her powerful mind, more alive than those at work in their many-windowed palaces, advancing with a firm step in the darkness of a tunnel that has no outlet, queen of a kingdom maintained by force of will, a kingdom created by sheer courage. And what courage! A courage that transcends our imagination, when we come to think that the same quality that inspires our moments of heroism is the source and origin of the smallest of her pleasures.

Not a single action can she ac-

comply without a superhuman effort, whether she talks to us of her work, her amusements or her plans, whether she goes to a theatre or a concert, or visits a town or museum, or simply strolls in her garden. If her courage forsook her, she would be lost; yet who knows if she has not profited by this iron necessity? Is not her intelligence incessantly stimulated by the exercise of an indispensable will? Have not her poor, hard-won resources made her retain in her woman's nature the mental acuteness and receptiveness of a child?

IV

HELEN also speaks to me of feminine evolution, in which she suspects a danger for her sisters:

“By asserting their rights, will they not lose their charm?” she asks.

Then she rejects this thought with a shrug of her shoulders:

“After all,” she says, “what does it matter what we are? The important thing is what we are able to do.”

All Helen’s psychology lies in that reflection. Cut off from externals, she has freed herself from them; and why should this simple girl care about a beauty which is the luxury of the eyes? She naturally knows nothing of the thousand precious threads of which our

woman's strength is woven. . . .

I rise absent-mindedly and catch sight of Helen in the glass. A strange vision! With her back turned to the window and to the bright snow-clad landscape, the blind girl is seated stiff and straight in a chair which happens to be opposite a mirror. Her set, unconscious face looks like a portrait in its frame. Her broad, finely-shaped head stands out against the vast wilderness of snow; and the sun draws a glittering halo round her head. Helen appears to me like a saint imagined by some Italian primitive. The fixed eyes do not answer to the inflexion of the face; the neck is a little stiff; the hands clasped over the knees are not really resting: she is a Cimabue virgin, infinitely touching in her simplicity. Absolutely ab-

sorbed in thought, dominated by a definite, obvious intelligence, she nevertheless suggests something unfinished. . . . Many times already I have asked myself what Helen lacks; the mirror tells me: it has not instructed her; it has never told her her charms and her defects; it has never revealed her image to her. That image lives and dies in the mirror, whereas with us it is the revealer, teaching us, correcting us and becoming the eternal companion of a grace which it unceasingly abandons and directs by turns. We can neither elude nor flee it; it is always with us; it symbolises our womanhood; it is distinct and fantastic, transparent and coloured like a figure in a stained-glass window through which we see the world outside. We shall never ourselves know how

far that inseparable sister influences our gravest actions and deeds. . . .

But, though we have need to see ourselves in order to find fulfilment, it is not in the glass of the docile and faithful mirror that we really know ourselves. It is by the looks of others; for the eyes of others seem to pour out the beauty that fills them. There is here a mysterious interchange. Does not the woman who loves rise and grow to the height of the eyes that contemplate her?

Looks that tremble and glance, looks that flame, pursue and weigh, prayerful, joyful or sorrowful looks, cold looks that judge, blame or approve: one and all they give, one and all they teach us to know ourselves. 'Tis therefore in the critical flash of others' looks that

we behold the truth; and we are the prisoners of the harmony that is expected of us.

Dear Helen has not stirred from her frame: has she guessed my reflections during my long silence? I think so, I am even a little inclined to fear so; and at all risks I express to her the other side of my thought:

“Independent of externals, Helen, you make for reality by the most direct paths.”

“And therefore,” she says, “my life is harder, but simpler than that of others.”

Helen in fact is close to that unity which we seek in vain, though wisdom promises it to us. To all of us there comes a day when our life is simplified. Dreams and vanities are in us like banners on the day after a festival; withered

flowers, faded ribbons, streaming colours: in the face of our anxiety, nothing remains but the essential. But, just because the details become effaced, the horizon widens, distances appear and other and graver problems arise. . . .

"And yet," replies the blind girl, "that evolution has taken place in my world. What others learn from life I have learnt from the books that are my sphere."

"That is true," says Mrs. Macy, who is following our conversation. "There is nothing that Helen does not know; I have never hidden anything from her; besides, she is too clear-sighted for it to have been possible."

"Then I may safely ask her what she thinks of love and happiness?"

"Oh, certainly!" replied Mrs. Macy. "She has thought a great

deal of the love and happiness of women."

And she at once communicates my question to Helen.

Helen remains impassive and says, slowly:

"All real love is precious."

But I insist:

"I am not speaking of love in general, Helen."

Then I see a soft light of resignation pass over her face; and, in a serious tone, she says:

"What woman has not longed for love? But . . . I think it is forbidden me, like music and light. . . ."

I look at the blind girl. She sighs and lowers her lids as though her eyes might betray her. I see her youth and the glow of health in her cheeks; a dull rebellion stirs me; and, with my natural inclina-

tion for sympathy, I feel a need to depreciate the too-delicious joys which a barbarous injustice seems to deny her:

“Ah, you could be loved, Helen, you could, I am sure of it; but I do not know that you ought to wish it. You would not have done what you have done, if you had known love! You do not know how dangerous it is, how it makes us live on mountain-peaks in the midst of abysses. We are close to the sky, but we turn giddy; and all the illusions of space assail us; and the too-bright light burns us; and we are lost, if we do not contrive, by a sort of contradictory will, to draw a new force from the very heart of total surrender. . . . No, do not regret love. It is the enemy of our intelligence, of our strength and even of our worth. You see,

Helen, between two intelligent people, experience of love, though it be favourable to the man, may be fatal to the woman. Whereas the man becomes stronger by a love which his nature orders and measures, the woman is lost in a sentiment that submerges her. . . .”

I could have added that, to my mind, it is better to contribute to the happiness and accomplishment of a being than slightly to raise our small stature; I could have told her that life is very ephemeral, that values are very relative and glories very illusive; but I was delighted, on the contrary, not to be seen or heard, for the sound of my voice would have belied the rigour of my words; and, in spite of myself, I felt that my mouth, as it curved into a smile, clothed them in a light that transfigured them. And yet

I was not lying, dear Helen! We all know that our truest sentiment becomes modified according as we discover it on one side or another and that, when sincerity, like limpid water, penetrates most deeply into our soul, it is then that we feel ourselves to be in a perpetual contradiction.

"I divine," said the blind girl, "all the sorrows contained in the joys of love. There is nothing that I do not know of the sufferings of the world."

Here is Helen speaking again, with some bitterness, of the suffering of the world.

"But where are you, Helen, to talk like this? In what mysterious country do you dwell? You do not suffer, do you?"

She smiled and reflected. Then she said:

"Happiness is like the mountain-summit. It is sometimes hidden by clouds, but we know that it is there."

"Is it always there, Helen?"

"When we wish it, because it depends upon our state of mind."

"And have you the strength always to wish it?"

"No." And, shrugging her shoulders a little cynically, she added, "Am I not a woman? I weep as much as the others, but I believe it to be good for the soil, like rain. All my visions are born of love and poetry; and . . . and those flowers cannot bloom without tears."

Helen almost always expresses herself thus, in images and symbols; one feels that she is wonderfully sensitive to the music of words and to rhythm, that mysterious

force which governs the truest essential beauty. Is it not the sense of art that has been largely instrumental in saving her? Is it not this precious gift which bestows an unwearying curiosity upon her and attaches her to life in spite of all things? Helen possesses the imagination of a poet to whom reality, however admirable it may be, is never more than a starting-point . . . and we may well ask ourselves if she would not be disappointed were she suddenly to behold a world which her mind has clothed in the most glittering enchantment. . . .

After a moment's thought, Helen resumes:

"I should like one day to have the power to express man's prayer to the light!"

And, as she speaks these words,

a charming smile irradiates her features.

"Helen, you shall utter that prayer which you already live, you shall utter it, for you dwell in a transparent night, whereas our ever-straying senses turn a bright sky into a cloud-darkened day. If you but knew how few things we see, how badly we hear and how incompletely!"

"Are not our senses the servants of our mind?"

"They ought to be, but they divide and scatter our forces by bringing us too much; our consciousness involuntarily and at every moment registers a thousand useless things; and that is why it advises us to flee the world if we would work and think. We do not live intensely unless we know how to close our lives to the outer

world. It may be love that keeps us between two flowering hedges, checking our aspirations as they mount to heaven; it may be that work and a single idea imprison us; it may be that a dream envelops us, an aim fascinates us or our will erects its iron barrier between us and fancy: our strength grows only in isolation. Our notion of infinity begins where sound and shape die. To you, infinity is here, in the breeze that cools your brow, in the perfume which, however subtle, remains, annihilating the years, burying the past; infinity is here, in the hand that presses yours. . . .”

For the last few minutes, Helen, a little tired of reading on my lips, had been listening and replying through the mind of her faithful

companion. Suddenly she asked me:

“Have you religion?” And she added, “I believe in God.”

I remember greatly admiring Anne Sullivan’s account of the intellectual development of her pupil. After recognising Helen’s sane mind and enlightened judgment, she writes:

“No creed or dogma has been taught to Helen; nor has any effort been made to force religious beliefs on her attention.”

Helen’s religion lies especially in self-abnegation and love for others; and it is thus that she believes herself to have found happiness:

“As the world is in ourselves,” she said, “happiness is not outside us; it is not a thing which we can

attain; if we seek it, we do not find it. . . .”

“You are right, Helen; and that is why we ought not to be surprised to see so many creatures who have everything to make them happy and who are not happy. What is the use of possessing the elements of happiness if we have not in ourselves the essential energy that builds it up patiently and maintains it in spite of all? But in you this energy, so rare in any case, becomes heroic. . . .”

With a gesture expressing gentle denial, Helen replied:

“I don’t know.”

And, after a pause, she continued, gravely:

“To find one’s life, one must first lose it. Mine was lost a thousand times; I could not recover the half of it.”

One might well think upon this maxim, which teaches us one of the great secrets of our moral force. It increases in proportion as we expend it. Ask little of it; and we have nothing. Be insatiable; and it becomes inexhaustible.

I was eager to ask her the question that was burning my lips:

“Then you are happy?”

Helen was just then bending over the hand of Mrs. Macy, who communicated the question to her. She drew herself up proudly:

“If I were not happy, my life would be a failure. I am very happy.”

“Can I in all truth, Helen, hold you up as an example to your distant sisters and call you ‘The Girl who found the Blue Bird’?”

The white peace of the cottage at Wrentham seemed to fly into a

thousand splinters like a pane of glass suddenly smashed by a volley of stones. Helen was screaming with delight; she had sprung up quickly and, walking across the room, uttered notes that sought to strike the joyous pitch of a song of gladness:

“Yes, yes, it’s true!” she shouted. “I have found the Blue Bird! I have found the Blue Bird!”

And in her excitement she pressed her hands to her forehead, clasped them convulsively in a triumphant prayer and unclasped them to seize hold of mine. . . .

V

THE sound of that captive happiness will ring in my ears all my life long. Even now, when I am speaking of the heroine, it floods my memories with the impetuosity of a torrent that tears away everything on its passage; and the miracle of Helen's life will always have two aspects in my eyes. It is a miracle of patience no less than of passion.

Her life seems to me a sublime lesson; and can we describe her as abnormal when we see her wandering in a world where so many mysteries dwell? Between her and us, space no longer exists, if we think of the space that stretches from the known to the unknown.

And can we say that her destiny is incomplete? Helen is the example necessary to our day, the glorification of effort, intelligence and strength, the sanctification of continuous and hidden heroism. She is a primitive saint and a saint of to-morrow! She is the archangel of the victories that are eternal and of the virtues that do not change with moral systems or with peoples.

Be happy, Helen, and be free, for you have proved that there is no real prison save in mediocrity, that the darkness which has no ending is the darkness of the mind and that mortal silence reigns only in loveless hearts.

But listen to me: I would crave of you one thing. Since you possess every heroic quality, we need not hesitate to wish you a crown-

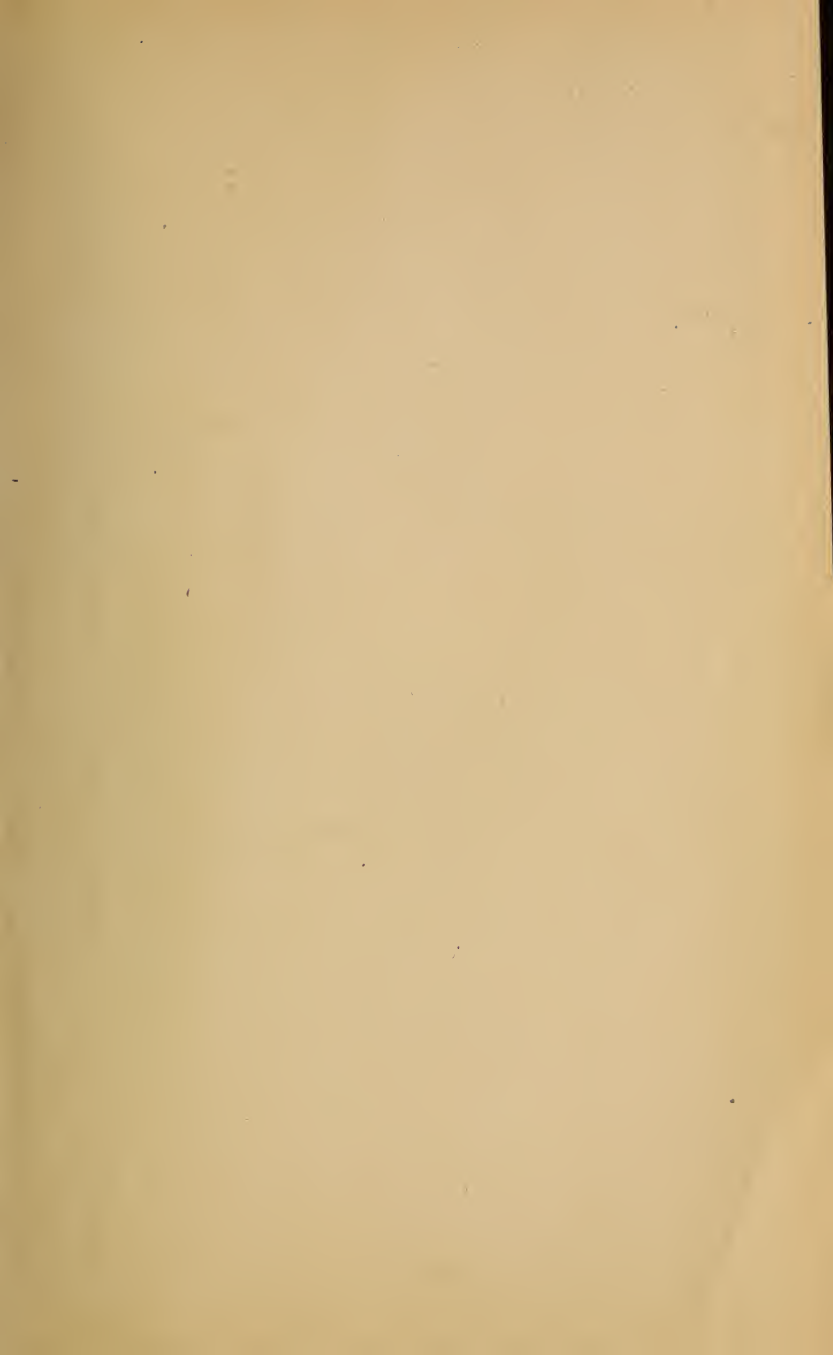
ing one. Deprived of sight, of hearing and of speech, you have been able to create afresh light, harmony and language; you know what we see, you know what we hear, you know how to communicate with us. Cease to astonish us: you have joined us, you wished it and you have succeeded. Henceforth forsake this world, which you have heroically conquered, and lead us into regions that are closed to us. Tell us the secret of your wisdom and your light. By the science of touch and smell, you have revealed to us a kingdom which we knew imperfectly; there is another, Helen, which we do not know at all: it is the world of eternal darkness and silence. All the sighs of life heave and throb in our solitude. We know darkness and silence only that we may seek re-

pose there or savour in them the profound joys that dread light and sound. To us, shade and quietness are refuges to which we resort with eyes glutted with light, ears filled with harmony.

Tell us what voices charmed your tomb, what stars lighted it. Analyse for us the springs of a power which we cannot conceive.

Helen, wonderful Helen, you who have surpassed us in strength and wisdom, tell us by what golden gate we may join you in our turn!

THE END





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